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Where the Kaiser meets Pinochet

Some thoughts on the role of museums in memorialising international crimes

ELISABETH BAIER — 13 May, 2019

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I recently visited a rather dubious location in Santiago de Chile. A restaurant, owned by a German, designed like a Bavarian beer house, praised by the local press as an 'authentic German enclave' in Santiago. There is nothing dubious to this as such of course. But when I entered the place, saw the fence surrounding it and the Prussian flag in its logo, I could not help the feeling that I might not be entering a usual pub. The walls inside were covered with hundreds of photos of the owner posing with numerous Santiago personalities, amongst a map of East Prussia and the occasional Pickelhaube. Marching music was playing in the background. The mirror close to our table reflected a large portrait of the last German Kaiser Wilhelm II hanging on the wall. When I went over to take a closer look, I discovered a small wood carved portrait of Augusto Pinochet hanging just beneath it. Kaiser Wilhelm II and Augusto Pinochet sharing the space on a restaurant wall – a remarkable and unusual merging of international criminal legal ends.

At first sight. At second sight, Kaiser Wilhelm II and General Augusto Pinochet actually have quite a lot in common. Both were military leaders, both committed a number of international crimes during their reign (that is according to the overwhelmingly accepted historiographical accounts), both were never held accountable for them, both ended up being decisive figures for the development of International Criminal Law. The Kaiser for being the subject of the first potential international criminal trial against a former head of state as per Art. 227 of the Treaty of Versailles, and Pinochet for his spectacular arrest in London and almost-trial under universal jurisdiction following an extradition request of Spain. The strange encounter with the Kaiser/Pinochet wall coincides with two recent visits to museums I undertook,

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which feature both personalities: Huis Doorn in the Netherlands and the Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos in Santiago de Chile. The owner of the restaurant obviously has his own (questionable) reasons to pay homage to the Kaiser and Pinochet. In the following I want to develop some thoughts on how the two museums deal with that question and what role they might generally play in remembering international crimes.

Huis Doorn

Huis Doorn is located in the small Dutch village of Doorn, a short bus ride outside of Utrecht. The Kaiser spent his years in exile from 1920 until his death in 1941 there, not without considerable support by Queen Wilhelmina and the Dutch government. His body remains in a mausoleum in the park surrounding the house, accessible only with the permission of the Hohenzollern family, who still manages it. Through the window one can take a peek inside and see a coffin covered with a Prussian flag; a dried-up bouquet of flowers

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is lying at the entrance door. Wilhelm was known for being chronically unhappy in Doorn. Until the end, he lived in the hope of the restoration of monarchy in and his return to Germany. The house seems to be an incarnation of that. It is crammed with the Kaiser's possessions, left exactly as they were. Almost all of the pictures feature Wilhelm himself or his family, numerous closets with his huge collection of military uniforms are on display. Museum guides eagerly await the visitors in every single room, answering questions and offering explanations. As a German visitor, one is torn between feeling uneasy and an odd fascination for the place. The house has been a museum for several decades now, but ran into various troubles lately. The – at best – controversial legacy of Wilhelm and the yearly visits of German monarchists caused some reluctance by the Dutch government to further finance the last domicile of the last German Emperor. However, support came from the Dutch Royal family. A visit by Queen Beatrix supported the opening of an additional exhibition on the Dutch experience of the First World War in a pavilion on the estate. Accordingly, the museum is now called 'Plaats van herinnering van de Eerste Wereldoorlog' – place of remembrance of the First World War. The director of the foundation running the museum underlines 'that it (is) not a German museum, but one chronicling European history' and 'we don't honour (Kaiser Wilhelm II) and nobody wants to honour him. But we remember'. The house by itself, while it merely displays and does not glorify anything, hardly seems capable of achieving this goal. Only the addition of the pavilion is partly able to do so, although it clearly concentrates on the neutrality of the Netherlands during the war.

Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos

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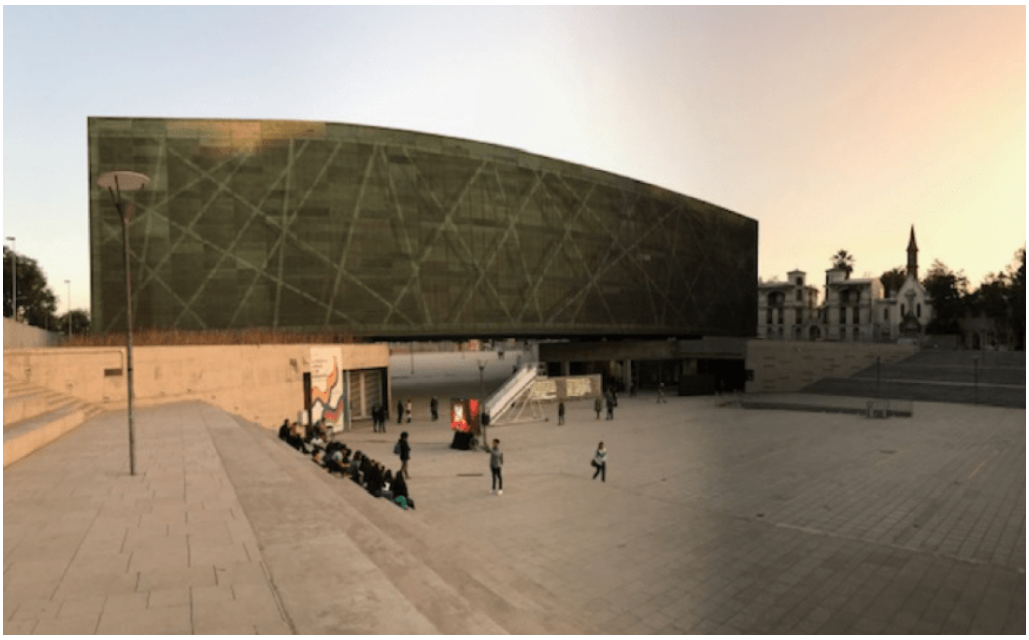

The Museum of Memory and Human Rights was opened relatively recently, in 2010, by former president Michelle Bachelet, herself a victim of torture under the Pinochet regime. The first unusual thing about the museum is its name. For someone wholly uninformed about Chile's recent history, neither the name itself nor the homepage feature the words 'Pinochet' or 'dictatorship' once. Instead the rather bulky term 'systematic human rights violations by the Chilean state between 1973 and 1990' is frequently used. The official aim of the museum is 'to allow dignity for victims and their families, stimulate reflection and debate and to promote respect and tolerance in order that these events never happen again'. The architectural composition seems to be chosen according to this aim: Truly monumental in size, it takes up a large space in central Santiago. The stairs leading down to the entrance are inscribed with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The exhibition inside is relatively small in comparison. It chronologically displays the history from the military coup of 11 September 1973, the establishment of the military dictatorship and its victims on the first, and the fight for and return to democracy on the second floor. The wall connecting the floors features an

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enormous collection of countless pictures of victims. Just as Huis Doorn, the Memorial Museum is also facing resistance. While it has been viewed as a mainly political project by (and even monument for) centre-left Bachelet by considerable parts of society, criticism from the conservative and far-right spectrum focuses on the lack of references to the conditions that the reign of pre-Pinochet president Salvador Allende created, and crimes committed by left-wing groups during the conflict. In any case, the exhibition does not quite live up to its monumental ambitions – some more, ideally neutrally phrased context of the conflict combined with the overwhelming focus on personal stories of victims would have helped.

Remembrance, memory and the importance of the narrative

The two museums display obvious differences. One is a former residence, pre-existing the decision to turn it into a museum. The other is the result of a grand political project to create a space that deals with the dictatorship in Chile. Yet both museums also share similarities. The aspiration that they are not a mere showcase of a set of events, but the recognition of the need to put their exhibitions into a specific, bigger context. For Huis Doorn it is the experiences of the Netherlands in the First World War, for the Memorial Museum the concept of human rights. They both acknowledge the importance and power of owning the narrative of the political conflict they display, and to a lower (Doorn) and higher (Memory) degree achieve this goal in their own terms. The Memory Museum seized the political chance of creating a certain narrative from the outset, while Huis Doorn eliminated unwanted ones by the addition of the pavilion later on. Within that narrative however, it is

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questionable if remembrance and memory can be used as interchangeable terms here. One can create a place of remembrance, but is it also possible to create a collective memory?

In a way, the design of both museums is also an expression of the struggles of their host countries: Chile, which is still trying to find a societal consensus on how to interpret its recent history, and the Netherlands, who might (or might not) question the role of its Royal family and government in the aftermath of the First World War. After all, it was the small, neutral Netherlands which denied the extradition requests of the Allies and thereby made it possible that the Kaiser was never tried. Lastly it is also interesting that none of the two museums deal with any of the legal aspects following the conflicts. A scarce glass case in the entrance area of the Memorial Museum features the reports of the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, without giving any further explanation however. No mentions of substantive crimes or potential trials – there is no attempt to make condemnation in a legal sense part of the remembrance and collective memory process. This is remarkable insofar, as Chile is at least a state party to the Rome Statute, while the Netherlands are even the host state of the International Criminal Court. Museums can certainly play a major role in memorialising international crimes – the legal intangibility of those crimes committed by Kaiser Wilhelm II and Augusto Pinochet however remains oddly reflected in the two major memorial spaces these figures occupy today.

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